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GEARING UP: COMPOSITIONAL ORDER IN *VANDOVER AND THE BRUTE*[1]

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To equate an author with his protagonist is always risky—more precarious still if the latter turns into a beast. Yet the term *alter ego*, or second self, which incorporates difference even as it identifies, aptly suits the close yet complex relation between Frank Norris and the eponymous hero in *Vandover and the Brute*. The novel invites readers familiar with Norris's background to step blithely through the minefield of Wimsatt's biographical fallacy and associate Norris with Vandover. Author and character both enrolled at Harvard, Norris for but one year, Van for the customary four. Vandover planned on studying in Europe; Norris actually did so. Like Vandover, Norris was gifted in the pictorial arts and began his career as a painter. Vandover, "possess[ing] the fundamental *afflatus* that underlies all branches of art," flirted with being an author, then settled by "merest chance" on painting.[2] Norris *and* Vandover also conceive of a pictorial "*chef-d'oeuvre*," which they fail to begin much less complete. But where Norris's procrastinations launched his writing career, Van's foreshadow his decline.[3] Even so, prior to Van's fall Norris appraises his character's talent in words suggesting self-assessment:

> His style was sketchy, conscientious, full of strength and decision. He worked in large lines, broad surfaces, and masses of light and shade. His colour was good, running to purples, reds, and admirable greens, full of bitumen and raw sienna. Though he had no idea of composition, he was clever enough to acknowledge it. His finished pictures were broad reaches of landscape, deserts, shores, and moors in which he placed solitary figures of men or animals in a way that was very effective....The effects he wished to produce were light and heat....Portrait work and the power to catch subtle intellectual distinctions in a face were sometimes beyond him, but his feeling for the flesh, and for the movement and character of a pose, was admirable. (*VB*, pp. 64, 66)

Reference to broad epic cast, lurid color scheme, and the "feeling for the flesh" patly accounts for much Naturalist technique, while other details may specifically allude to Norris. The "solitary figures" set in stark

landscapes, for instance, may foreshadow the ending to *McTeague*, perhaps Norris's most "finished picture," and a novel begun contemporaneously with *Vandover*.[4] "Sketchy" and "conscientious" may be read as a positive valuation of Norris's more compulsive stylistic tendencies, such as repetition and hyperbole. Most intriguing is the dual-edged reference to Van having "no idea of composition," though being "clever enough to realize it"—a comment encompassing Norris's method in *Vandover and the Brute*.

To date, few of the most perceptive Norris scholars have credited the author with a compositional method in *Vandover*. Though impressively reconstructing Norris's early career, James D. Hart still treats the text as an apprentice novel, faulting its repetitiveness and abstract imagery (*NM*, pp. 45-46); Donald Pizer, in his seminal critical study of Norris, cites the book's "technical weaknesses" which make it an absorbing novel but not a "mature" one.[5] Lately, Lee Clark Mitchell has pointed out method to Norris's madness for lists, hyperbole, and scattered images.[6] Yet what even Mitchell neglects is the ordering desire behind such chaotic gesture, a desire Norris encodes not in Vandover, his degenerating protagonist, but in Geary, the figure who survives.

I shall argue below that the inconsistencies in *Vandover* largely account for the novel's allure; that a method to the text is founded on Norris's consciousness of his compositional shortcoming and consequent aim to turn this fault into a formalizing dynamic. *Vandover and the Brute* is Norris's first literary attempt to control the chaos depicted in his work and intrinsic to his style. In light of this effort, the stylistic flaws in *Vandover* need be reevaluated as possible strategies for creating order from disparate experiences. This reading, in turn, calls attention to the author's likeness not merely to his hero, Vandover, but to his anti-hero, Charles Geary. True, Geary is not at all a sympathetic figure, and the text does not explicitly condone his behavior. Few would dispute Don Graham's assessment that Geary is the "most rapacious character in the novel,"[7] nor disagree with Pizer that he is "too much a scheming, self-preoccupied character to attract any warmth" (*NFN*, p. 42).[8] Yet from another standpoint, Norris may be viewed to have adapted Geary's methods of control to his own compositional technique.

II.

Vandover's compositional problems are manifest in life long before apparent on canvas. We learn at the very outset that:

> It was always a matter of wonder to Vandover that he was able to recall so little of his past life. With the exception of the most recent events he could remember nothing connectedly. What he at first imagined to be the story of his life, on closer inspection turned out to be but a few disconnected incidents that his memory had preserved with the greatest capriciousness, absolutely independent of their importance. One of these incidents might be a great sorrow, a tragedy, a death in the family; and another, recalled with the same vividness, the same accuracy of detail, might be a matter of the least moment. (*VB*, p. 5)

A demonstration of this trouble directly follows. Van's memory of his mother's death precedes a trivial recollection "in which he saw himself, a rank thirteen-year-old-boy ...playing with his guinea pigs" in his back yard. "In order to get at his life," the narrative continues, "Vandover would have been obliged to collect these scattered memory pictures as best he could, rearrange them in some more orderly sequence, piece out what he could imperfectly recall and fill in the many gaps by mere guesswork and conjecture" (*VB*, p. 5). With its temporal leaps and mood swings, the novel, especially when discussing Van's thought process, replicates Vandover's struggle to "get at his life." Yet as we shall see, Vandover is neither the only character in the work who seeks to order his experiences, nor the only one whose attempts the novel reenacts. Coming so early in the work, the passages cited above sound the keynote for depictions of a discomposed world, describable yet resistant to any ordering. This is a world of fire, earthquakes, shipwrecks, a world where glasses shatter in people's hands, nights on the town erupt in brawls, and society balls resemble ancient rites; where a prostitute looks like a milkmaid, a deaf-mute sings, and a man learns his fate from a bartender.

The constituents of order are themselves in disarray. Clocks, either broken or ignored, appear in several scenes.[9] Communication is likewise ruptured. Words in dialogue are accented for no apparent reason; within which unstable discourse, *non sequiturs* are laced with significance. Geary's " 'Cherries are ripe!' " for instance, is said to

have "a hidden double meaning"; Ida Wade's " 'It's more fun than *enough*!' " sounds tragic in its context (*VB*, pp. 56, 176).

Abetting the confusion caused by suspect ordering devices are conflicting accounts of phenomena. Norris's description of Flossie the prostitute (pp. 51-52) is a case in point. To say that Flossie *reeks* of purity gives some indication of the author's paradoxical rendering. She is introduced as "an immense girl, quite six feet tall, broad and well-made,...full-throated, heavy-eyed, and slow in her movements." As if associations with the country milkmaid were not yet sufficiently defined, Norris goes on to mention Flossie's teeth, "regular as the rows and kernals of an ear of green corn." Her face, on which there is "no perceptible cosmetic," epitomizes purity; it has "a clean and healthy look as though she had just given it a vigorous washing." Moments later, however, this face is said to bear "the unmistakable traces of a ruined virtue and a vanished innocence," and to be unduly exposed as a "portion[] of her nudity." Flossie's scent is subject to the same incongruous portrayal. Her "air of cleanliness,...a delicious perfume that was not only musk, but that seemed to come alike from her dress, her hair, her neck, her very flesh and body" is alternately described as the "foul sweet savour of the great city's vice," the "odour of abandoned women."

Yet the damning depiction does not displace the more attractive account of Flossie. Flossie may not merely *appear* the prototype of freshness; in contrast to "the general conception of women of her class [as] a painted and broken wreck," Flossie genuinely "radiates health." Thus when at the conclusion of her portrayal Norris writes that "she betrayed herself as soon as she spoke," one is tempted to ask *which* "effect of her appearance" "was spoiled." For an uncouth farm girl is as like a call girl to have "a low-pitched rasp[ing]" voice, "husky, throaty, and full of brutal, vulgar modulations." To sum up, Norris's rendering of Flossie is not simply patterned after a 'fair without, foul within' formula, or according to a narrative ordered sequentially to reveal a hidden truth. One can 'read' Flossie in any or all of three ways—as a foul prostitute whose exterior yields "the effect ...of a simplicity and severity so pronounced as to be very striking"; as a split personality encompassing *both* "the foul" and "freshness"; or as a unified being in whom foul and fresh are fused.[10]

Vandover contains many such conflicting renderings, raising questions that defy definitive response. Are Turner Ravis and Dolly Haight, for instance, virtuous or compromised? If compromised, is this the outcome of their behavior toward Van; or is this the consequence of

an intrinsic defect, "a stereotypical flatness deriving from their "attempt to be unmitigatedly 'good'"? (*LP*, p. 395) Is the description of the Wade household, of which every facet is an imitation, an elaborate metaphor for hollow social mores? Or (and?) does the exaggerated artifice of the house justify the constructed nature of the social world?[11] Are the simplistic dualisms drawn between Turner and Flossie, and between "good and evil" generally (*VB*, pp. 52, 215) to be taken seriously? Or do the style and seemingly arbitrary placement of these remarks invite sardonic interpretation?[12] The number of times Norris makes one stop to say "it could also be *thus*," suggests his manipulation of the narrative to make his reader share with his characters both the impression of chaos and desire for its mitigation.

Yet Vandover's attempts to rectify this chaos are at best half-hearted. An ordered world and ordered work are of little value to him. He approaches life and art with equal apathy. To "acknowledge" compositional failings and to right them are two distinct activities; acknowledgement merely causes Van to lessen his immediate discomforts. Incongruities of daily life—such as the fact that Van learns more about his shipwreck from a barkeep than from his own experience of the wreck—he "marvel[s] at" with "wondering curiosity" (*VB*, p. 149), then ignores. To order is simply his way of adapting to disorder, of "easily fitting ...into new grooves, reshaping [his character] to suit new circumstances" (*VB*, p. 27). This strategy hastens his downfall. Vandover the Dandy, soothed by his piano repertoire of the same three pieces "always played together and in the same sequence" (*VB*, p. 31), enacts a ritual comparable to Vandover the Outcast's sequencing of meals: "On Monday he beat up and down the Barbary Coast, picking out fifteen or twenty saloons which supported a free lunch counter in connection with the bar. He took his breakfast Monday morning at the first of these. He paid five cents for a glass of beer and ate his morning's meal at the lunch counter: stew, bread, and cheese. At noon he made his dinner at the second saloon on his route. Here he had another glass of beer, a great plate of soup, potato salad, and pretzels. Thus he managed to feed himself throughout the week" (*VB*, p. 320).

Order as a mode of adapting to conditions is figured specifically when Van loses his furnishings to creditors. Vandover's own form of re-possession is to pin up placards reading " 'Pipe-rack Here,' " " 'Mona Lisa Here.' " So hideously satisfactory is this palliative that when he later has the means, Van reneges on his earlier pledge to buy back his belongings: "he suddenly realized that his oldtime desire was passed; he

had become so used to these surroundings that it now no longer made any difference to him whether or not they were cheerless, lamentable, barren. It was like all his other ambitions—he had lost the taste for them, nothing made much difference after all. His money had come too late" (*VB*, p. 280). The perverse ordering that occurs within Van's mind at the height of his seizures, when "the objects in the range of his vision...move back and stand upon the same plane" (*VB*, pp. 226, 239), mimics his adjustment process of psychically reducing all conditions to the same plane.

Van's companions are also obsessed with ordering. For Bancroft Ellis, order is an end in itself. Hence, his "curious passion for facts and statistics" printed in "little books and cards" with which he stuffs his pockets and to which he constantly refers, though his data are "never ...of the slightest [real] use to him" (*VB*, p. 46). Less pathetic than Bancroft's devotion to postal rates and train schedules, though far more destructive, is Dolly Haight's faith in "call[ing] things by their right name" (*VB*, p. 97). Dolly naively ascribes to things an order that he need only acknowledge to partake of—as if to recognize Flossie for what she was (presumably a simple task) were enough to shield him from her syphilitic kiss. Turner Ravis is less ingenuous than the men. In her relentless farewell to Van—an unmitigated flow of self-justifications filling nearly three pages of text—Turner is as thorough as Ellis in her search for meaning. Yet she recognizes a need to construct an ordered pattern from her experience: "I find I don't care for you as much as I thought I did. *What has happened has only showed me that* ....[W]hen I saw how easily I could let you go, *it only proved to me that* I did not care for you as I thought I did" (*VB*, pp. 202-03, emphasis added). The world provides Turner with material to make sense of and thus affirm an ordered world.

Charles Geary operates on a more sophisticated level than does Turner, in conjunction with his broader aims. His ordering method involves continual conversion of daily experience into lists and schedules suiting his purposes. The experience to be ordered may be anyone's or anything—Geary's meals, Vandover's schedule of college courses, the coincidental shattering of two glasses on the same day—though he is "particularly pleased" when the procedure lets him "get the better of anyone" (*VB*, p. 18). Not content merely to arrange his material, Geary attacks it with compulsive ferocity, manifest especially in repetitive speech. While the coterie at Turner's expresses its bewilderment at the second shattered glass, "all sp[eaking] at once, holding imaginary beer glasses ...in their outstretched hands," "Geary refuse[s] to be carried away by their excitement," and is carried away by

his own machinations instead: "one heard him from time to time repeating, between their ejaculations, 'It was the heat from her fingers, you know, and the glass was cold'" (*VB*, p. 39).

Geary's reasoned intensity literally pays off—in a law degree and advantageous clerkship in an esteemed firm; and by acceptance into the cotillion-set to which Turner, Van, and Dolly belong from birth. His method, moreover, is self-perpetuating. As his personal stock rises, so too does the worth of the material available to order, and so do the consequent rewards. Where once he completed Van's study card, Geary (Esquire) swindles his friend out of valuable real estate. The small disasters he once rationalized away prepared him well for the lucrative damage suits of which "Geary made a specialty" (*VB*, p. 249). Parasitic, immoral, and ruthlessly organized, Geary succeeds at ordering his life to a degree far exceeding Turner and precisely where his male peers fail. Nowhere is this more evident than at Henrietta Vance's cotillion—paradoxically a "coming out" party for Geary and Vandover, marking one's entrance into Society and the other's expulsion from it. Considered allegorically—and Norris, an inveterate medievalist,[13] might well have conceived it thus—the dance is a masquerade ball for Chaos costumed beneath an orderly veneer. As Van receives the cold shoulder and Ellis hides in the coat room; as Turner chooses Dolly in a match fated for frustration; as men compete "like brokers in a stock exchange" to fill their dance cards, and women waltz with "a morbid hysterical pleasure the more exquisite because mixed with pain" (*VB*, pp. 189, 191), Geary alone retains control:

> Geary, however, walked about calmly, smiling contentedly, very good-humoured. From time to time he stopped such a one of the hurrying excited men as he knew and showed him his card made out weeks before, saying, "Ah, how's that? *I* am all fixed; made all my engagements at the last one of these affairs, even up to six extras. That's the way you want to rustle." (*VB*, p. 189)

The night began with Geary's "first advancement in life" (*VB*, p. 188), his promotion to replace an ailing colleague. The rainstorm signaling the end of the cotillon evokes a similar example of his knack for exploiting others' misery. " 'Ah,' said Geary, delighted, peeling the cover from his umbrella in the vestibule"—amidst "exclamations of dismay" and "brothers and sisters quarrelling with each other over the question of umbrellas"—"I *thought* it was going to rain before I left

and brought mine along with me. Ah, you bet I always look for rain!' " (*VB*, pp. 197-98) Due in part to these reasoned displays, one can bet on Geary's future as a sunny one.

A simile implicit throughout the novel presents Geary relating to the world as an engineer to machinery. He makes the Wade suit "a machine with which to force Vandover into the sale of his property," uses "the vast machinery of the great law firm [to] raise him to a great place in the world of men," fits "operatives" into the apartments built on the land he swindles from Vandover (*VB*, pp. 252, 327). Yet as his relentless drive, his assessment of himself as "an instrument of the law" (*VB*, p. 251), even the name *Geary* all attest, Geary is himself an ordering mechanism, transforming experience into a blueprint of the meaning of life:

> Vast, vague ideas passed slowly across the vision of his mind...of the infinite herd of humanity, driven on as if by some enormous, relentless engine, driven on toward some fearful distant bourne, driven on recklessly at headlong speed. All life was but a struggle to keep from under those myriad spinning wheels that dashed so close behind. Those were happiest who were farthest to the front. To lag behind was peril; to fall was to perish, to be beaten to the dust, to be inexorably crushed and blotted out beneath that myriad of spinning iron wheels. (*VB*, p. 329)

Significantly, Vandover attains a correlative insight, as "[t]he whole existence of the great slumbering city passe[s] upward there before him through the still night air":

> It was Life, the murmur of the great, mysterious force that spun the wheels of Nature and that sent it onward like some enormous engine, resistless, relentless; an engine that sped straight forward, driving before it the infinite herd of humanity, driving it on at breathless speed through all eternity, driving it no one knew whither, crushing out inexorably all those who lagged behind the herd and who fell from exhaustion, grinding them to dust beneath its myriad iron wheels, riding over them, still driving on the herd that yet remained, driving it recklessly, blindly on and on toward some far-distant goal, some vague unknown end, some mysterious fearful bourne forever hidden in thick darkness. (*VB*, pp. 230-31)

These parallel passages measure the extent to which Van and Geary create order in their lives, and the consequences of their varied commitment to such ordering. To their shared observations of an "enormous engine" "crushing" the tardy members of humanity's "infinite herd," Geary adds pragmatically that "the happiest" keep to the front and that "[t]o lag behind was peril." Geary thus implies his intention to succeed; Vandover appears to merely "marvel at" affairs in that pathetic state of "wondering curiosity" he had earlier displayed. Moreover, Van's observation concludes Chapter XIV, and as the next chapter takes up the account one week later, we are left retrospectively with an impression of Van suspended in bewilderment.[14] Geary's vision comes near the beginning of the final chapter (XVIII) wherein he will exploit Vandover most hideously (hiring him to clean the apartments built on land which rightfully belongs to Vandover). And disrupting Geary's vision—without so much as a paragraph break to separate his revery from what follows; directly following and so associated with the image of being "blotted out beneath that myriad of iron wheels"—is the reference to "Vandover standing in the doorway" (*VB*, p. 329). The later passage actually demonstrates the positions Van and Geary assume in the revelation that they share. Geary is mentioned at the beginning of the passage so as to signify the revery is his. He is thus literally "farthest to the front" in the description of "the enormous, relentless engine" goading humanity's "infinite herd." Vandover, mentioned at the close of the paragraph, apparently "lag[s] behind," "inexorably crushed and blotted out beneath" this "relentless," "inexorably" repetitive account.

III.

That his visionary blueprint virtually copies Van's insight coincides with Geary's mode of exploiting others to facilitate his own ends. Yet, as he is unaware of Vandover's reflection, this instance points not to Geary's practice but rather to a narrative technique: a figurative "exploitation," or simply, a co-optation undertaken by Norris to advance the double-plot detailing Geary's rise and Vandover's decline. That is to say, Geary's methods of ordering through repetition and co-optation are themselves, as it were, co-opted by his creator. I have focused on Geary's ordering technique precisely to suggest such similarities in procedure. If Geary is the ordering genius in the text, Norris is the ordering genius controlling it, employing the same

techniques of *repetition, "exploitation,"* and especially *listing* that his anti-hero applies.

Like Geary, the narrator in *Vandover* is obsessed with inventories. Beginning with the description of Van's backyard in Chapter III, lists follow one another in rapid succession, thereby adding to the chaos they ought ostensibly to mitigate. The dysfunctionality of these lists, Mitchell observes, is their most salient characteristic. The typical list in *Vandover*, like the record of debris near the conclusion of the novel which the critic takes for his example,

> points to nothing other than itself. The description culminates a series of scenes as sharply rendered and just as inconsequent, without illuminating the people involved or otherwise advancing the plot. Indeed, these scenes defy the usual logic of realist metonymy by introducing gratuitous detail that expresses how little appearances happen to reveal. As the physically irrelevant accumulates, the novel gradually calls into question the normal process by which the material sign is imbued with cultural significance. Circumstances that are carefully detailed convey nothing about the individuals involved, as if to emphasize that descriptions of things are as arbitrary as the things themselves. (*LP*, p. 387)

In one respect, lists in *Vandover* are not as self-reflexive as Mitchell claims. The first detailed description of Van's surroundings, for example, foreshadows his decline. "[A]djoining" the "charming" homestead of his youth was "a huge vacant lot with cows in it ...full of dry weeds and heaps of ashes, while around it was an enormous fence painted with signs of cigars, patent bitters, and soap" (*VB*, p. 33). The sign in his yard, "'Look Out for the Dog," does call attention to itself by not being a conventional "Beware" sign. Yet rather than "lead nowhere," the sign plausibly analogizes Vandover to his dog—for Van will turn into a brute of the Mr. Corkle variety, more vulnerable than injurious. "Look Out," moreover, is more readily apprehensible as a dictum for *the reader of a book* than "Beware" would be. Thus the referential possibilities of the listed objects trace, and alert one to, Vandover's degeneration.

Yet the lists *are* self-reflexive in another sense. For instance, what the incongruities in this first list point to is the disorder of observable phenomena, hence the need for order to be conferred through an artificial mechanism *such as* a list. Within Vandover's yard, the unsettling

amalgam of eucalyptus and magnolia with banana trees, and of these in turn with firs, and of humming-birds with English sparrows, figures the confusion even inherent in something pleasing (quasi-Edenic) and ostensibly well-ordered. But by bringing together this assortment *in a list*, Norris constructs his own pattern, indeed a kind of symmetry of oppositions—of yards, of trees, of birds, of trees to birds—where once chaos reigned.

Other lists operate similarly, illuminating the need for an artificial ordering even as they satisfy that need (while also conferring order on the narrative more conventionally through a series of revealing symbols). The inventories of Vandover's apartment mark another telling instance. What is striking about Van's first vision of his "charming bachelor's apartments, the walls covered with rough stone-blue paper forming an admirable background for small plaster casts of Assyrian *bas-reliefs* and photogravures of Velasquez portraits" (*VB*, p. 169), is that his dream home precisely replicates the quarters of his attorney, Mr. Field, whom Vandover has recently visited (*VB*, p. 162). Here then is an instance of either Van acknowledging "no [original] idea of composition," or of his pliancy with respect to the ordering process—or of both. In any case, he implicitly allows Field to order his living space as though this were an extension of Vandover's finances; as he had allowed Geary to arrange his affairs; as, on the textual level, his character enables Norris to order Van's experience—which the author does in Geary-like fashion, through a listing process suited to advance Norris's own purposes.

Following Vandover's vision is the actual account of his apartment (*VB*, pp. 177-79), revealing again his ordering difficulty and the essentially chaotic nature of his world. Fastened to a huge dark rug hung against Fieldesque blue wallpaper, are "a fencing trophy, a pair of antlers, a little water color sketch of a Norwegian fjord, and Vandover's banjo": a peculiar amalgam forced into some order as hangings on one wall—though becoming more ordered still in an artificial context, as names arranged on one list. Atop the "breast-high bookcases" also inspired by Field, are "a multitude of small ornaments," including "a little bronze clock" and "a calendar": ordering devices the inadequacy of which is shown in other scenes, here mentioned among objects of *display* so as to imply their uselessness.

The list of Van's remaining possessions, overflowing three paragraphs as the objects overflow his rooms, juxtaposes cultural *bric* to *brac* approaching the mundane: "Donatello's lovely *femme inconnue* [to] beer steins"; Flossie's slipper in which Van keeps cigarettes to the lamp Turner gave him for Christmas; prints of old masters to

"photographs of actresses in tights." If as Mitchell and Joseph McElrath observe, Vandover is damned by an insipid bourgeois "logic [whereby] whatever is not acceptable by middle class standards is firmly proscribed as 'brutal,' "[15] his room appears an open challenge to the sensibility that condemns him. In fact, there is nothing programmatic about Van's pad. He makes his arrangements solely with his comfort in mind.

Yet at the level on which we interpret Van's experience as *a written account;* where the layout of his apartment becomes a *detailed inventory* of his possessions—this arrangement amounts to an ordered expression of *the novelist's* aesthetic freedom, expressing his rejection of an aesthetic that foolishly polarizes "art" and anything remotely instinctual. Remarking photos of show girls set beside the *Mona Lisa*, consciously conjoins art and instinct, as does listing objects listed on Van's bookshelf: the Donatello reproduction flanked by a Turkish slipper on one side, and animal tintypes on the other. As "brutes" artistically portrayed, the animals of Fremilt and Barye in themselves figure this conjunction—so too does Mona Lisa, who Graham notes to have been "a profoundly dualistic symbol" in the nineteenth century, signifying both spirituality and sensuality.[16]

Norris's lists thus function as they normally do in realist narratives, to "make any scene effective" in its "substantial details" (*NM*, pp. 45-46), and to "intimate a context of values unapparent in individual items" (*LP*, p. 386). Yet lists for Norris serve additionally as *controlling mechanisms*, as means for constructing a personal sense of order. And to find a model for this practice we have not to look outside the novel toward literary tradition or the author's peers, but again within the work—toward Charles Geary.

For Norris's inventories function as Geary's do. In the manner alluded to by Mitchell, the author ostensibly keeps track of anything and everything as an end in itself—just as Geary records his activity for no ostensible purpose other than to "inform Vandover" "[i]n the morning ...of how many hours he had slept and of the dreams he had dreamed," and "[i]n the evening ...[of] everything he had done that day; the things he had said, how many lectures he had cut, what brilliant reactions he had made, and even what food he had eaten" (*VB*, p. 18). Yet beneath this apparent motive of *lister pour l'amour de lister*, is the quest for control on the part of author and character alike. As Geary is "delighted to assume the management of things," not only of his own but of others' details, so Norris *via* his lists seeks to mitigate chaos within his narrative. As lists help satisfy Geary's "inordinate ambition" to rise, so on the literary level they aid the novelist in his

double ambition to complete a narrative at once orderly (hence in need of the functional capacities of the list) and illustrative of life's duplicity (which the list exposes by juxtaposing apparent incongruities).

Norris and Geary also construct order through repetition, as we have already witnessed. According to Hart, repetition in *Vandover* anticipates the author's "epic style" of stock words and paired or trebled phrases, and in his initial novel this "portentous diction" fails miserably. "Such language plunges Norris into a mysterious but obsessive state of being, in which he strives to summon up 'the deep murmur, the great minor diapason that always disengages itself from vast bodies, from mountains, from oceans, from forests, from sleeping armies' " (*NM*, p. 45; quoting *VB*, p. 227). Pizer concurs that Norris's failure to perceive how "simplistic, loaded, and repetitious metaphors and symbols" detracted from his work "accounts for much that is weak in his fiction, from *Vandover* to *The Pit*" (*NFN*, pp. 49-50).

I shall comment soon on comparable effects of repetition in Norris's later work. Here I wish to point out that concomitant with this repetitive mode in *Vandover* is an ordering founded on repetition. That mode, to borrow from Hart, recalls the "obsessive," repetitive speech mannerisms of Geary, who by repetition apparently *wills* order upon his surroundings—reiterating nonsense sayings which in their "hidden logic" make sense of his situation (" 'cherries are ripe!' " " 'Ah, you bet' "); "incessantly talking about what he had done or was going to do" until what he was going to do *becomes* what he had done; continually invoking his own gloss on affairs, and so rationalizing—and later capitalizing on—disaster ("from time to time repeating ...'It was the heat from her fingers, you know, and the glass was cold.'") This fixated yet creative, willful repetition which orders is at the root of Norris's own rhetoric. That is, the author's repetitions operate as language-acts through which he "strives to summon up" on the printed page and within the context of his narrative, "that prolonged and sullen diapason ...of the great slumbering city" (*VB*, p. 230).

Hart's more serious critique of repetition in *Vandover* is that it results from outright carelessness. We might note in response that the most baldly repeated descriptions in *Vandover*—the identically worded depictions of "the careless sort" which expose "the incompleteness of the novel" (*NM*, pp. 45-46)—are of the most frighteningly chaotic episodes. Hence, for instance, the repeated references to Ellis's drunken seizures, in which "the skin around his eyes was purple and swollen, the pupils themselves were contracted," as "suddenly he swept glasses, plates, castor, knives, forks, and all from off the table with a single movement of his arm" (*VB*, pp. 58, 299), may not be careless at all but

rather a contrived means of controlling disordered experience. The repetitive accounts of Vandover's convulsions—depicted far more frighteningly than these barroom brawls—achieve a similar regulating effect.

And that specific repetition, listing in three instances Van's "inevitable reaction[s]"—the numbness in his head and the illusory swelling of his limbs, his "blind, unreasoning terror," the "slow crisping and torsion of his nerves, twisting upon each other like a vast swarm of tiny serpents ...spreading slowly to every part of his body" (*VB*, pp. 225-26, 230, 239-40, 242-43, 306)—evokes the sense of narrative control in another form as well, *via* stark yet orderly epiphanies, revelations that emerge from the terror.[17] It is after Van's first seizure that he attains the vision Geary later shares, of "Nature" goaded by the "enormous engine" of "Life." When he is next stricken, all the objects in Van's room seem to "move back and stand upon the same plane....At first the room looked unfamiliar to him, then his own daily life no longer seemed recognizable, and, finally, all of a sudden, it was the whole world, all the existing order of things, that appeared to draw off like a refluent tide, leaving him alone, abandoned, cast upon some fearful mysterious shore" (*VB*, pp. 239-40, 242). Order is thus conferred by the "draw[ing] off" of the disorder that is "all the existing order of things." Van's final seizure culminates in a similarly poetic vision:

> It was warm; the atmosphere was dank, heavy, tepid. One or two stars were out, and a faint gray light showed him the vast reach of roofs below stretching away to meet the abrupt rise of Telegraph Hill. Not far off, the slender, graceful smokestack puffed steadily, throwing off continually the little flock of white jets that rose into the air very brave and gay, but in the end dwindled irresolutely, discouraged, disheartened, fading sadly away, vanishing under the night, like illusions disappearing to the first touch of the outside world. (*VB*, p. 307)

These epiphanies disclose another ordering strategy of Geary's co-opted by the novelist: the exploitation—or, transferred onto the literary plane, simply the utilization—of Van's (and others') misfortune to achieve the author's aims. A writer will of course often use a character to the latter's disadvantage, usually in order to solve a problem hindering the story's resolution. He may remove one coordinate from a

love triangle, for example, as Norris in fact removes Vandover, disrupting Van's attachment with Turner Ravis so that Turner becomes engaged to Dolly Haight. There is nothing unique about this aspect of Norris's method; but the extent to which he applies it is noteworthy. His additional removal of *Dolly* from the triangle, enabling Geary to wind up with Turner,[18] reflects the degree to which characters in the novel—including Geary, eponymous cog in its machine—serve as means to authorial ends.

In a sense, then, Norris and Geary both benefit from Dolly's illness; and as Geary profits from largescale disaster, so Norris acquires something from the outbreak of syphilis among his characters, which, Mitchell observes, helps order the novel, "[c]irculating through the plot as it does through society" (*LP*, p. 403). Yet like Geary, Norris (figuratively) exploits Vandover most of all. That Van may be identified with Norris hardly mitigates the "abusive" relation of author to protagonist; in fact, it helps justify this relation. Since Vandover is also privy to these ordering epiphanies, his failure to use them virtually legitimates his victimization by Geary and Norris, who put this vision to use. In the characteristically repeated words of the author's other surrogate, the logic of exploitation is the survival of the fittest: "Every man for himself—that was what he said. It might be damned selfish, but that was human nature: the weakest to the wall, the strongest to the front. If he had to sacrifice Van, so much the worse" (*VB*, pp. 251, 328).

The novel concludes with Vandover brutalized and Geary triumphant—and with Norris, by applying Geary's methods, achieving compositional order in *Vandover and the Brute*. Norris probably does not identify secretly with Geary on any level other than a creative one. In the context of the author's determinism, however, this creative identification suffices to dictate Geary's success, insofar as the character is aligned with the compositional method of his creator. If Norris's "sympathies are all with the Vandovers" of this world (*NFN*, p. 42), it is still Geary whose success accords with the outcome of the work in which he and Vandover serve as Norris's *alter egos*.

IV.

Norris's quest for order extended beyond the problematic of his first novel. In his last work, *The Pit*, he plies similar strategies to different

ends—not as in *Vandover* to acknowledge order in variety, but to establish order in conformity.

The Pit, Howard Horwitz argues, fails to meet Norris's own aesthetic demand that the author reveal the "truth" of " 'elemental forces,' " rather than dally on the " 'merely accurate description' " of surface details. To be true to his word, Norris would have had to condone the speculative activities of the protagonist in *The Pit*, Curtis Jadwin, since the "elemental forces" presented in the novel are aligned with the "business and pecuniary...'motives that stir whole nations.' "[19] Norris would also have had to curtail the romantic subplot concerning Jadwin's troubled marriage to the beautiful Laura, since marriage is a metaphor for natural law, hence for a theory of "real" economic value that threatens a theory of speculative value. But instead, notes Horwitz, Norris affirms the marriage plot and naturalizes the forces of production—thereby villifying the forces of speculation. "The marriage and speculation plots are [thus] harmonized and become versions of each other" (*FVX*, p. 216).[20]

By embracing one set of values over another through the narrative strategy of harmonization, rather than sustain the differences between opposed values represented in these plots, Norris dispenses with the most radical ordering technique employed in *Vandover:* the unification of opposites by their joint inclusion in a narrative inventory. Thus, structurally no less than through the values it affirms, *The Pit* evinces what Warren French has called Norris's "growing conservatism and reconciliation with the genteel tradition."[21] Yet *to harmonize* is still *to order*, and the other ordering methods utilized in *Vandover* are here used again. The repeated, repetitious reference to the "Black, grave, monolithic" Board of Trade Building, "crouching...without a sign of life under the night and the drifting veil of rain";[22] and the equally obsessive, twice-repeated description of what Jadwin seeks to corner ("Almighty, blood-brother to the earthquake, coeval with the volcano and the whirlwind" [*P*, pp. 80, 373, 387]) serve to depict trade as a force of nature, and wheat as a real (instead of merely *speculative*) entity. Repetition, I am suggesting, is used to reconcile wheat and trade with a theory of real value. Moreover, these repeats, and the similarly reiterated symptoms of Jadwin's seizures (brought on by his addiction to speculation), also create a sense of narrative control by regulating, linguistically, the chaos they describe.[23]

Norris thus also "exploits" Jadwin for the ordering ends he attained by "exploiting" Vandover. And at the climax of this, his last novel, as at key moments in his first, the author makes use of his character's

misfortune to bring about an insight that character and author both may share. The novel builds to the point when Jadwin, "[b]lind and insensate," yet seeking desperately to save the corner that enslaves him, enters the speculation pit. Chaos mounts; Jadwin is beset by vengeful rivals ("wolves yelping for his destruction" [*P*, p. 393]). Suddenly the hero's sufferings culminate in an unexpected moment of calm, recalling the epiphanies produced by Vandover's seizures:

> ...the tumult of the Pit was intermitting. There were sudden lapses in the shouting, and in these lapses he could hear from somewhere out upon the floor voices that were crying: "Order—order, order, gentlemen."
>
> But, again and again the clamour broke out. It would die down for an instant, in response to these appeals, only to burst out afresh as certain groups of traders started the pandemonium again, by the wild outcrying of their offers. At last, however, the older men in the Pit, regaining some measure of self-control, took up the word, going to and fro in the press, repeating "Order, order."
>
> And then, all at once, the Pit, the entire floor of the Board of Trade was struck dumb. All at once, the tension was relaxed, the furious struggling and stamping was stilled. (*P*, pp. 393-94)

The scene is synecdochic of Norris's continued efforts to order his narratives of chaos. Though his idea of order itself underwent drastic change, this attempt to regulate in *The Pit* as in *Vandover*, marks a repeat (albeit with a difference). Perhaps, as he did within particular novels, Norris sought control over his *oeuvre* through repetition.

NOTES

[1]I wish to thank Christopher P. Wilson and Mark Kazarosian for their invaluable assistance with this essay.

[2]Frank Norris, *Vandover and the Brute* (Lincoln, 1978), p. 12. Other page notations in the text from *Vandover and the Brute* (abbreviated VB) refer to this edition.

[3]For this and subseuent biographical information, I am indebted to James D. Hart's "Introduction" to *Frank Norris, A Novelist in the Making: A Collection of Student Themes and the Novels 'Blix' and 'Vandover and the Brute'*, ed. James D. Hart (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 6-7, 12-13. All other page notations in the text and notes from Hart's study (abbreviated *NM*) refer to this edition.

[4]*NM*, pp. 24-25, 40. "It is...not improbable that in an early stage *McTeague* may...have been conceived in relation to *Vandover and the Brute*...both works were begun at the same time and intermittently added to and revised over the same period of years."

[5]Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Frank Norris* (Bloomington, 1966), p. 51. Other page notations in the text from Pizer's study (abbreviated *NFN*) refer to this edition.

[6]Lee Clark Mitchell, "'Little Pictures on the Lacquered Surface': The Determining Vocabularies of Norris's *Vandover and the Brute*," *PLL* (1986), 386-405. Other page notations in the text and notes to Mitchell's essay (abbreviated LP) in the text and notes, refer to this edition.

[7]Don Graham, *The Fiction of Frank Norris: The Asthetic Context* (Columbia, 1978), p. 35. Other page notations in the text and notes from Graham's study (abbreviated *FFN*) refer to this edition.

[8]In adding that "Norris's identification with Vandover makes [Van] a pathetic figure," Pizer helps standardize the perspective I here attempt to challenge: namely, that the only character with whom Norris aligns himself is Vandover.

[9]Broken clocks in *Vandover* are emblematic of the chaos in which they are situated. Geary reports that "a little earthquake...'stopped our hall clock at just a little after three'" (p. 36). The Wades' disordered clock, "perversely set in one corner of an immense red-plush palette" "[i]n the exact middle of the mantelpiece," is "one of the chief ornaments," the skewed centerpiece, as it were, of their disordered home. In its crazed condition, it is a paragon of frenzy: "The clock was never wound. It went so fast that it was useless as a timepiece" (p. 71).

Clocks often seem mentioned simply to show that they are ignored. Though Vandover "resolves[s] never to let [his late father's watch] run down so long as he should live" (p. 160), the "Old Gentleman's timepiece is never cited again, and one may assume that in the course of his travails Van has lost it, or that the watch was repossessed with his other belongings. A clock in Van's apartment is mentioned among his "multitude of small ornaments" (p. 177); thus implicitly, it is an object of display with no functional purpose. And since Van winds this clock while "pottering around" with no place to go (p. 181), he is shown to set his watch once time has lost all meaning for him.

The text itself approaches time haphazardly, as though the narrator had lost track of time. The first stage of Van's "career of dissipation" is said to have "lasted about a year" (p. 208); "for about a year" he occupies the first in a series of decrepid apartments (p. 271)—increasingly wretched domiciles register Van's fall far more effectively than does temporal reference. The houses are noted in sequence; allusions to time, on the other hand, are scattered, unexpected, actually *out of context* since the text creates no impression of time's passage in which to place these references. Thus the reader is startled to learn how much

time has passed. Where Van is discomfited on seeing Flossie "grown stouter since [he] had first known her, nearly ten years ago" (p. 282), the reader is surprised that a period of ten years may have passed within the narrative. (The exact amount of time characteristically uncertain, for we cannot locate Van's first "knowledge" of Flossie in relation, say, to the night he "knew" Ida Wade.) Reference to Van "drift[ing] about the city" "for two years" (p. 315) has a similarly jarring effect. Here again, the *amount* of time elapsed shocks more than what Van does during these years (endure "a real hand-to-mouth existence").

[10]Joseph McElrath notes the conflicting portrayal of Flossie in "Vandover and the Brute: Narrative Technique and the Socio-Critical Viewpoint," *SAF* 4 (1976), 27-43. (Subsequent reference to this essay [abbreviated *NT*] is to this this printing.) McElrath nevertheless contends, viably, that "Flossie does not [really] 'radiate health' " (p. 37). Yet I would argue that in the duplicitous world of Norris's vision, the world that Flossie symbolizes, a syphilitic prostitute can radiate health even as she projects sickness. "Radiate" may indeed be used to denote a merely apparent condition, and this usage works in Flossie's case, for there "h[angs] about her an air of cleanliness," her musky odour "seem[s]" to emante from her body, and she betray[s]...her appearance" when she speaks. Yet it is the very essence of this chaotic environment that the real and merely apparent are so intertwined as to not only be indiscernible from but actually identifiable with each other. (See following paragraph in text, and Note 11.) In other words, Vandover depicts a reality which "knows not seems" though "seems" often exists.

[11]Imitations at the Wade home are themselves imitated. The "Corinthian pillars on either side of the vestibule...were painted to imitate the wood pillars of the house, which in its turn was painted to imitate stone." "Near the piano straddled a huge easel of imitation brass [i.e. of fabricated fabricated gold] upholding the crayon picture of Ida's baby sister [in some sense, Ida imitated] enlarged from a photograph" (VB, pp. 70-71). When it is difficult to tell where imitation stops (perhaps this explains why Norris places the house "'drapes'" in quotation marks?), everything, paradoxically, may seem real. Veblen would have had "more fun than enough" at the Wades'.

[12]In his essay, McElrath argues that much of the novel is related through free indirect discourse, and that sentimentally expressed points-of-view reflect Vandover's opinions, not the narrator's (or Norris's). To McElrath, sentimental language signals a critique of the views presented in that language, since Van is portrayed sympathetically as a figure warped by Victorian convention. "[Norris] was consciously using melodramatic language derived from the lexicon of popular morality to depict the conventional mental and emotional responses of a traumatized victim of that morality...Norris's own implied response, unlike Van's, is one critical of the society that is permeated with this morality" (pp. 29-30).

[13]Hart reports that young Norris wrote a romance-cycle (replete with battle plans and sketches of armored knights), and

later a long story on a similar theme; and that his first published work was an article about armor written during his student days in Paris. See *NM*, pp. 6-7.

[14]Hart (*NM*, pp. 47, 50) contends that a missing chapter may once have preceded Chapter XV of the published text. If a 'XVa' did exist, its deletion (assuming Norris himself removed the chapter) might suggest Norris's aim to underscore the ineffectiveness of Van's ordering insight—the chapter's absence creating the impression of Van arrested and confused. If there never was a 'XVa,' Hart's very conjecture of something missing between Chapters XIV and XV points to the author's successful rendering of this arrest.

[15]*LP*, p. 395. McElrath offers a similar assessment (see *NT* pp. 33-34).

[16]*FFN*, p. 38. To Graham, "[t]his merger [of sacred and profane in the description of Van's apartment] is effected most clearly in the profuse allusions to women. Flossie, Turner Ravis, the girl in Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, Mona Lisa, the Vandyke lady, and the actresses are all subsumed under the rubric of *femme inconnue*: unknown woman. Woman expresses a duality: heaven and hell."

[17]The depictions of Van's seizures are not reiterated word-for-word but varied slightly each time. I would submit this repetition with a difference as further evidence of Norris's conscious, rather than "careless," use of repetition. The reiterated reference to Van's and Geary's insight is also varied slightly, and significantly, as we have seen. Even the repeated accounts of Ellis's drunken fits are not precisely the same. As Hart indirectly implies, *only* the description of Ellis's eyes and of the "sudden []...single movement of his arm" with which he clears the table, are identical in both instances. The other portions of the accounts vary, including the reports of others' reactions to Ellis's fits.

[18]Vandover claims seeing Turner ride with Geary to a football game. The two are evidently a couple: " 'Charlie was with Turner Ravis on the box seat' " (p. 293). Dolly Haight later tells Vandover that he and Turner had been engaged prior to Dolly's discovering his illness (p. 304).

[19]Howard Horwitz, "'To Find the Value of X': *The Pit* as a Renunciation of Romance," in *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Baltimore, 1982), pp. 218-219). (Subsequent reference to this essay [abbreviated *FVX*] is to this printing.) In this particular citation, Horwitz quotes Norris, *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (New York, 1962), pp. 194, 204.

[20]Pizer remarks that the love and speculation plots share "no common theme" (*NFN*, pp. 165, 174). Horwitz, "argu[ing] the obverse side of the same coin," notes that "*The Pit* goes out of its way" to harmonize the plots, and concludes that their unification is unsatisfactory: "A marriage that forgets the world that makes the marriage contract possible shares in speculation's

scandalous insouciance of objects in the world...If the Jadwins' hermetic love is offered as the best way to escape the difficulties of a credit economy that is but obliquely and shiftily related to the natural world, it is no escape at all" (*FVX*, pp. 215-16, 234). Horwitz's argument actually implies that "harmonization" imprecisely defines this plot relation. "Harmony" connotes balance, whereas the marriage plot subsumes the speculation plot within the narrative context; moreover, the speculation plot may be said to corrupt the marriage plot. In either case, the unification of the plots creates dissonance.

[21]Warren French, "Introduction" to *Vandover and the Brute* (Lincoln, 1978), p. x.

[22]Frank Norris, *The Pit* (New York, 1903), pp. 41, 420. Other page notations in the text and notes from *The Pit* (abbreviated *P*) will refer to this edition.

[23]Jadwin's symptoms are remarkably similar to Vandover's. Compare the references to the numbness in Jadwin's head and illusory swelling of his hands; to his "Strange, inexplicable qualms"; and to the "slow, tense crisping of every tiniest nerve in his body...A dry, pringling aura as of billions of minute electric shocks cre[eping] upward over his flesh" (pp. 321, 346-349) with the descriptions from Vandover cited above (VB, pp. 225-226, 239-240, 242-243, 306). this and other cross-textual reiterations support the possibility that Norris sought to confer order upon his *oeuvre*, as well as within specific novels, through repetition. My contention departs somewhat from Hart's explanation that "[o]bviously Frank Norris did not intend to employ the same material twice in two published novels, but perhaps in a period when he despaired of ever publishing *Vandover and the Brute* he simply pillaged passages for the newer *Blix* [and subsequently, for *McTeague, The Wave,* and *The Pit*]" (*NM*, pp. 22, 46). Norris's skepticism over publishing *Vandover* may certainly have contributed to his use of passages from the novel in these other works. Yet the ordering effect of these passages in the works wherein they appear suggests that Hart's opinion is not wholly explanatory.